**Religious Studies Spring Symposium 2016**

Hosted by University of Alberta Religious Studies Program

**8 January 2016: Call for Papers**

Dear colleagues,  
  
Although April 1st might be a bit early to call it a "spring" event, we are holding our annual RS symposium on Friday April 1st. The topic is Religion in Science Fiction. Dr. Joshua LaBare is teaching a course for us on this topic in the current academic term, and we will showcase some of the student papers from that class at the Symposium.  
  
I would also like to ask the broader RS community for proposals for papers on any aspect of religion and its treatment, representation, function, image or use in science fiction (broadly defined). Please  
Let me know if you are interested in giving a paper asap and send me an abstract and title for a paper that would last no more than 20 minutes, and ideally 15 minutes, by Monday February 8th.  
  
Best wishes,  
Dr. Andrew Gow

**1 April 2016: Symposium Program & Abstracts**

Location: Room 81, Tory Building, University of Alberta

Links to presentations submitted to University of Alberta Education & Research Archive (ERA) institutional repository are included below if available. See also: https://era.library.ualberta.ca/collections/44558t352

9:00 Coffee

9:30-10:30

* Dr. Sha LaBare, RS/UofA: The Meaning of Treedom
* Anuska Sarkar, Undergraduate student, UofA: Animism: The Appeal and the Reality

11:00-12:00

* Andrew Morland, Undergraduate student, UofA: Refusal to Fully Acknowledge Mortality and its Manifestation in Water-Based Myths
* Nakita Valerio, History/UofA: [Star Wars and Maghribi Sufi Islams: Reasons Why the Religious Studies Literature Overlooks an Obvious Comparison](https://era.library.ualberta.ca/files/bgf06g278g) [Full-text in UAlberta ERA institutional repository]
  + [note: this paper was entitled “Maghribi Sufi Islams and the Force” in the pre-conference program)

12:00-1:00 lunch

1:00-2:00

* Peter Sabo, RS/UofA: The Bible in/and Margaret Atwood’s Speculative Fiction *MaddAddam* Trilogy
* Michael Gillingham, RS/UofA: The Apocalypse as Science Fiction:  Popular Christian and Popular Muslim Depictions of the “End of All Things”

2:30-3:30

* Dr. Susan Raine, Sociology, MacEwan University: Colonizing Terra Incognita: L. Ron Hubbard, Scientology, and the Quest for Empire
* Dr. Glen Fairen, RS/UofA: TBA

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Abstracts:

Sha LaBare: The Meaning of Treedom

From the Tree of Life to Yggdrasil, from Fangorn to the olive branch, trees are key to religious, scientific, and science-fictional discourses, providing metaphors for the shape and nature of life on this planet. Indeed, humans are quite literally descended from trees, owing their clever hands to an evolutionary history spent among the branches. By investigating the personhood of trees in both sf and in what Bron Taylor calls “dark green religion”, in “The Meaning of Treedom” I explore some fruitful connections between sf and religion, including their shared focus on making first contact and maintaining ongoing communication with nonhuman beings, their insistence on the possibility of other worlds beyond our ken, and their foregrounding of ethical questions regarding what it means and might mean to be “human”. Interweaving stories from ecofeminist and Taoist sf writer Ursula K. Le Guin, James Cameron's Avatar, and Dr. Seuss's excellent sf parable The Lorax with animist themes from Jane Goodall, David Abram, and Graham Harvey, “The Meaning of Treedom” traces the contours of a radical ecological ethics emerging in the face of a global ecological situation which, for all intents and purposes, looks like the end of the world as we know it.

Nakita Valerio: [Star Wars and Maghribi Sufi Islams: Reasons Why the Religious Studies Literature Overlooks an Obvious Comparison](https://era.library.ualberta.ca/files/bgf06g278g) [Full-text in UAlberta ERA institutional repository]

Do not those who disbelieve see that the heavens and the Earth were meshed together then We ripped them apart? And then We made of water everything living? Would they still not believe? (Qur’an 21:30)

United we are to one supreme Source created and molded by the same Divine Force. (Shirazi)

There is a life-force within your soul, seek that life. There is a gem in the mountain of your body, seek that mine. O traveler, if you are in search of That, Don't look outside, look inside yourself and seek That. (Rumi)

"The Force is what gives a Jedi his power. It's an energy field created by all living things. It surrounds us and penetrates us. It binds the galaxy together." (Ben to Luke)

The Star Wars franchise remains the most successful cinematic project in history and there is no shortage of scholarly analyses of its story, history or social impact. In the realm of religious studies, scholars have tended to focus on elements of existing religious traditions that appear to be present in what some call the “Star Wars theology” (Ahmed, 2015). While many make the argument for the presence of elements from Zoroastrianism (Hussain, 2000), Buddhism (Feichtinger, 2014) and “Judeo-Christian”\* apocalypticism (Lyden, 2007) in The Force in the first released film in the series, Star Wars: A New Hope (1977). Others have noted that the entire venture itself is a response to the Secularization Theory movement of the 1960s (Ahmed 2015).

While these approaches are not entirely wrong, they do overlook a series of significant influencing factors in the creation of A New Hope: the fact that it was largely filmed in Tunisia and that many parts of the Star Wars philosophy closely resemble and absorbed elements from Maghribi Islams, including Islamic apocalypticism and especially elements of Sufisms which were still largely in practice before the rise of fundamentalist Islams in the region after the 1980s. In this paper, I explore the evidence to make the case for a Star Wars appropriation of Maghribi Sufi Islams, drawing on the script, film and documentation regarding the making of the film, including staff interviews. I conclude by questioning why such a hole exists in the scholarly literature, focusing on narratives that suggest the incompatibility of Islam and America (with Star Wars as the ultimate American export), and Islam and peaceful asceticism.

\*A term which the author uses, not me, for I find it to be deeply offensive and Christo-centric. (See: Shalom Goldman, “What do we mean by Judeo-Christian?” Feb 25, 2011, religionsdispatches.org)

Peter Sabo: The Bible in/and Margaret Atwood’s Speculative Fiction *MaddAddam* Trilogy

Biblical references appear throughout Margaret Atwood’s works, but are especially prevalent in her works of speculative fiction, as in her recent *MaddAddam* trilogy. The very title of the trilogy, for example, refers to a computer game in a dystopian, pre-apocalyptic world based on Adam’s naming of the animals in Genesis 2.20 (only in the video game, the player is challenged not to name all the living animals but all the dead, extinct ones). More than sporadic references, however, this paper will argue that the Bible stands as an analogy in the *MaddAddam*trilogy to the tension between humanity’s tendency toward destruction and apocalypse and humanity’s creative and regenerative abilities. At times, therefore, the Bible is a sign of rigid dogma, a text which humans can use to bring about the “fate of Sodom” to the entire world. At other times, particularly in the second volume, *The Year of the Flood*, the Bible functions as a critique against a decaying capitalist society and even as a text that offers regenerative hope in the post-apocalyptic world (and will continue to function as such until the world no longer needs it).

Michael Gillingham: The Apocalypse as Science Fiction:  Popular Christian and Popular Muslim Depictions of the “End of All Things”

     Recent depictions of the apocalypse, heavily influenced by the genre of science fiction, have influenced both popular culture and the public imagination in both Western Christian and Islamic societies.  This popular literature often departs from historical  doctrinal orthodoxy and presents a strong challenge to the authority of the church and the mosque in understanding both the ‘signs of the times’ and a faithful response to those ‘signs’.  In both cases, the apocalyptic is presented as a theopolitical whole with potential political implications for its consumers and those who hope to lead them in political institutions.

I will be reviewing this literature, looking for similarities and differences

between the Christian and Muslim depictions of apocalypse in the context of the genre of science fiction.  Examples of this apocalyptic literature in the West include the novels of American evangelical Christians Tim LaHaye, Jerry B. Jenkins and Joel C. Rosenberg.  Examples of this apocalyptic literature in the Muslim world  include the books of writers like Muhammad Isa Dawud, Hisham Muhammad Abu Hakima, and Ahmad as-Saqqa.  In ways that scholar René Girard might refer to as mimetic, the Christian and the Muslim apocalyptic writers mirror a concern about the Last Days and present a troubling view of the Jewish people while differing in the final outcome for the various actors involved.

Susan Raine: Colonizing Terra Incognita: L. Ron Hubbard, Scientology, and the Quest for Empire

        Charting and conquering the nefarious thetan colonization of the human citizens of planet Earth became one of the central goals of L. Ron Hubbard’s early Scientology philosophy.  Certainly, ‘clearing the planet,’ was, and remains, a vital directive for Scientologists.  The process of planetary clearing involves removing engrams (painful memory traces from previous intergalactic lives), and ultimately the intrusive thetan presence that causes them, thus releasing humans from the emotional and physical constraints imposed by these invasive cosmic entities.

        Hubbard claimed to have accessed an alternate dimension where he alone had acquired knowledge about the true nature of galactic history and the human condition. From this revelation, Hubbard planned to explore and conquer the uncharted territory of the mind--what Hubbard identified as Terra Incognita--in order to address all human problems and limitations.  Over several decades, he developed strategies to colonize both the material and immaterial dimensions of human existence.  In this talk, I discuss just some of the ways that several dominant themes from the early SF tradition—namely, colonialism, empire, and masculinity—manifest both in Hubbard’s narratives and doctrinal policies.

Glenn Fairen: TBA